

TIPS ON WORKING WITH STATE AND LOCAL LEGISLATORS

You may have heard someone say, “All politics is local.” It’s true because legislators need election votes and, therefore, they must act on issues that are important to their constituents.

So, don’t be afraid to talk with your legislators about your mentoring program. The most important thing is to build a relationship now with your legislators and their key staff members by familiarizing them with your program, its impact on the community and the challenges you face. You will benefit, and your legislators will appreciate becoming more informed and having a trusted resource on mentoring.

Consider using these methods to build those relationships:

- Send letters to your legislators on issues of concern, and thank them if they help out.
- Attend town hall meetings or other events where your legislators will be present, and introduce yourself.
- Meet with staff in legislators’ district offices.
- Send updates on your program to legislators.
- Invite legislators to an event that will showcase your program and how it affects the community.

It may be daunting to start advocating for your program and for mentoring, but without advocacy, you have a much reduced chance of realizing positive mentoring policies or receiving state and local funding.

Hosting Events with Legislators

No matter what type of event you have, the key focus should be on mentoring and how it helps people in the community. Make sure that legislators will learn about the importance of your program and the issues with which you need help. The event should be informative and allow you time to build a good relationship with your legislator(s).

Event ideas include:

- Inviting your legislator(s) to an event for your program, such as a recognition dinner for your volunteers, a get-together celebrating mentee achievements, a board meeting, etc. Make sure that your event shows mentoring and your program in a positive light. Your legislator(s) could be invited to speak, present awards to program participants or simply network with community members and learn more about the impact of mentoring.
- Provide a “tour” of your program to your legislator(s). You could invite them to sit in on a portion of a training session for mentors, join in a group or corporate mentoring session and/or be a “shadow” mentor for a short period of time (i.e. work with a trained mentor to help a child with their schoolwork for 20 minutes or some similar activity). The goal of this event would be to give your legislator(s) a brief and focused look at what mentoring programs do for the community.
- Host a community forum on mentoring. Invite your community supporters to speak about their involvement with mentoring and how it benefits the community. Invited guests should include representatives from various parts of the community, including mentors, mentees, board members, CEOs of local businesses with corporate mentoring or time release for employees, teachers or principals from schools with mentoring programs, and local government officials committed to mentoring. The event could be structured in many ways, such as a “roundtable” discussion, a working lunch to talk about mentoring informally, or a more formal hearing with speakers followed by a question-and-answer session. This type of event would give your legislator(s) an opportunity to learn about mentoring issues directly from community members affected by your program.

After you decide the type of event you want to have, consider these guidelines:

- Make sure you have the concept of your event well thought out. You should be able to explain what your legislator(s) will learn from the event, what role they will play, and who in the community will be attending your event.
- Plan your event for a day that suits your legislators' working calendars. Otherwise, the people you want to attend may not even be in town.
- At least several weeks before the event, call your legislators' offices and ask to speak with the scheduler. Discuss your event with the scheduler, and follow up with a written request confirming your invitation and the details of your event. Don't be afraid to call the scheduler again if you do not have a response in a week. If any of your board or staff members have a personal relationship with a legislator, ask them to write a note or make a call to follow up on the invitation. If the scheduler declines your invitation, ask if there is a better date to reschedule or if one of the legislator's staff members could attend instead.
- If your event is an appropriate venue for press, discuss this with the legislator's office. The press secretary may want to issue a press release or arrange for local media to cover the event. You may want to issue a press release about your event and the legislator's participation, but make sure to clear this with the legislator's office first. You also may want to arrange for a photographer to attend.
- Ensure that each participant knows the focus of the event, that the legislator(s) will be attending, and any issues you would like them to address.
- Prepare background materials for the legislator(s), including pamphlets or fact sheets on your organization, as well as briefs on the issues you will discuss and your organization's impact on the community. You may also want to prepare materials for other event participants.
- Make sure your issues can be covered in the allotted time. Legislators are very busy and often have several events to attend in one day. Make sure your event does not run over the time period you have agreed upon with the scheduler. If possible, plan time before and after the event to respond to any questions the legislator may have.
- One week before the event, follow up with all participants and legislators to remind them of the event.
- During your event, introduce the legislator(s) to other participants, stressing their involvement with mentoring. Try to get a business card from the legislator(s) and staff members who attend.
- After the event, send a thank-you note to the legislator(s). If there are any photographs or newspaper articles that result from the event, send copies to your legislator(s).

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